

## Implementing a Trauma-Informed Approach

Survivors of human trafficking have often endured a degree of trauma significant enough to have lasting psychological and physical effects. To appropriately support survivors, a trauma-informed approach should be incorporated across all anti-trafficking efforts, including during the criminal justice process and while providing victim services. It is also critical to use a trauma-informed lens when carrying out prevention strategies and when engaging with survivors in the context of public awareness activities and media reporting.

Trauma is an emotional response to a terrible event.<sup>1</sup> Most people have experienced some degree of trauma over the course of their lives, but every person responds to a traumatic event differently. A range of stress responses may be exhibited after experiencing a traumatic event; many individuals recover without lasting consequences while others experience long-term effects, including depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, and suicidal ideation.

Survivors of trafficking often experience **complex trauma**, which is the exposure to multiple traumatic events, often of an invasive, interpersonal nature, with wide-ranging and long-term effects.<sup>2</sup> Trafficking survivors also frequently have experienced **polyvictimization**, where they endure multiples types of victimization or community violence – including emotional, physical, or sexual abuse from various actors.<sup>3</sup> Research indicates complex trauma changes how one thinks, what one thinks about, and the brain’s ability to store and make memories, experience healthy attachments, and develop trust.

Trauma disrupts the rational thought process and impairs the ability to handle stress, perceive when a threat is in the past, and manage emotions. Victims often experience re-traumatization when they are “triggered” or have flashbacks or intrusive thoughts that replicate the experience of their initial trauma. A survivor who may appear to be uncooperative, combative, or difficult could be experiencing such overwhelming symptoms related to trauma. A sense of stability and security must be attained before the individual can be expected to engage constructively with any systems or services. It is also important to recognize that maladaptive behaviors, including risky behaviors such as drug or alcohol abuse, can be part of an individual’s survival mechanisms.

All those engaged in anti-trafficking work must understand the vast impacts of trauma and incorporate a trauma-informed approach to their work to more effectively support victims of trafficking. Law enforcement officials, prosecutors, service providers, and other allied professionals will likely observe a wide range of reactions related to trauma during the course of their work with survivors. Understanding the reason behind a survivor’s actions will contribute immensely to building rapport and trust, whether preparing a victim-witness for trial or providing appropriate services.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.apa.org/topics/trauma/>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.nctsn.org/trauma-types/complex-trauma>

<sup>3</sup> Turner, H, Finkelhor, D, and Ormrod, R. (2010). Polyvictimization in a National Sample of Children and Youth. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, V 38, issue 3, 323-330.

<sup>4</sup> Department of Justice. *Human Trafficking Task Force e-Guide, Strengthening Collaborative Responses*. 5.4, Landing a Successful Prosecution. <https://www.ovcttac.gov/taskforceguide/eguide/5-building-strong-cases/54-landing-a-successful-prosecution/the-victim-as-a-witness/>

Without a trauma-informed approach, criminal justice professionals and service providers may miss important cues and unintentionally re-traumatize the individual. Personal safety and self-preservation are the primary focus of the trafficking victim; concerned with basic matters of survival, victims may seem unresponsive or reluctant to engage. Many survivors may not self-identify as victims, and may even make initial statements that seem to protect the offenders, or even run away from or avoid law enforcement and service providers who are trying to assist them. Such realities require a greater investment of time, patience, and rapport-building than in traditional cases.<sup>5</sup>

Being trauma-informed is a strengths-based approach that is responsive to the impact of trauma on a person's life. It requires recognizing symptoms of trauma and designing all interactions with victims of human trafficking in such a way that minimizes the potential for re-traumatization. In particular, this approach emphasizes creating physical, psychological, and emotional safety and well-being to address the unique experiences and needs of survivors. It involves creating a safe physical space in which to interact with survivors as well as assessing all levels of service and policy to create as many opportunities as possible for survivors to rebuild a sense of control.<sup>6</sup> Most importantly, it promotes survivor empowerment and self-sufficiency. Victims of human trafficking should be empowered with choice whenever possible, including the ability to determine whether to participate in the criminal justice process. They should also have access to services that promote autonomy and are comprehensive, victim-centered, and culturally appropriate.

Additionally, trafficking survivors share that one of the most important steps to being trauma-informed is to be survivor-informed. A survivor-informed practice includes meaningful input from a diverse community of survivors at all stages of a program or project, including development, implementation, and evaluation.<sup>7</sup> Whenever possible, law enforcement officials, prosecutors, service providers, and other allied professionals should solicit feedback from survivors on organizational policies and programming. Survivors should also be involved in evaluation activities, focus groups, and other efforts to assess the effectiveness of service delivery. Moreover, when sought out to provide input or consultation, survivors should be paid for their expertise and time.

Below is a checklist developed by the Trauma Center at the Justice Resource Institute for implementing a trauma-informed approach across prosecution, prevention, and protection efforts.

**Checklist for a trauma-informed approach  
to interactions with survivors of human trafficking\***

- Be aware if the individual appears shut down or disconnected; this may be a sign that the person is overwhelmed.

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<sup>5</sup> Department of Health and Human Services. *Human Trafficking Task Force e-Guide, Strengthening Collaborative Responses*. 5.4, Landing a Successful Prosecution.

<sup>6</sup> Department of Health and Human Services. SAMHSA's Concept of Trauma and Guidance for a Trauma Informed Approach. <https://store.samhsa.gov/shin/content/SMA14-4884/SMA14-4884.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/otip/resource/htlasipractice>

- Have materials available that may support regulation of affect and impulses during meetings, conversation, or testimony.
- Check in to make sure the survivor is hearing and understanding your statements or questions and provide frequent breaks.
- Be aware that changes in memory do not necessarily indicate falsehood or storytelling, but may be indicative of a trauma response.
- Try to hold interviews or other key conversations at a time when the survivor feels most stable and safe.
- Help break down tasks concretely; assume that even small tasks may feel overwhelming. Support the survivor in accessing help with task completion.
- Focus on the facts of experiences, rather than getting caught up in the individual's emotional response or perception of events in making determinations about criminality.
- Be aware of the often confusing nature of the individual's relationships with the perpetrators; be conscious of not making assumptions.
- Don't take strong reactions personally; be very aware of managing your own emotional responses.
- Provide opportunities for control and empowerment whenever possible.
- Be aware of the importance of physical as well as emotional supports.

\* Adapted from Justice Resource Institute, Utilizing Trauma-Informed Approaches to Trafficking-related Work. [http://www.traumacenter.org/clients/projectreach/H-O%20Trauma-Informed%20Case%20Study\\_final.pdf](http://www.traumacenter.org/clients/projectreach/H-O%20Trauma-Informed%20Case%20Study_final.pdf)